

Message Text

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PAGE 01 STATE 011299
ORIGIN NEA-04

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /005 R

66011

DRAFTED BY:NEA/PAB:DBARCHARD

APPROVED BY:NEA/PAB:PWLANDE

-----180927Z 076247 /10

R 180641Z JAN 77

FM SECSTATE WASHDC

TO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

S E C R E T STATE 011299

FOLLOWING DACCA 0246 SENT ACTION SECSTATE JAN 14; REPEATED
TO YOU QUOTE

S E C R E T DACCA 0246

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, EAID, BG

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VIEWS ON PRESENT SITUATION IN BANGLADESH
AND RECOMMENDATED U.S. PROGRAMS

1. I HAVE BEEN IN BANGLADESH FOR TWO MONTHS. MOST OF
WHAT I HAE FOUNDV HERE IS IN LINE WITH THE EXCELLENT
BRIEFINGS I RECEIVED IN WASHINGTON, BUT I HAVE REFINED
CERTAIN VIEWS AS A RESULT OF FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE IN THIS
COUNTRY. THIS MESSAGE GIVES MY ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT
SITUATION IN BANGLADESH AND LAYS OUT THE APPROACH I THINK
WE SHOULD FOLLOW IN OUR VARIOUS OPERATIONAL PROGRAMS.

2. POLITICAL SETTING: OXIBILITY AT THE PRICE OF INCREASED
AUTHORITARIANISM. I HAVE BEEN FAVORABLY IMPRESSED BY
GENERAL ZIA IN THE SEVERAL LONG DISCUSSIONS I HAVE HAD
WITH HIM, INCLUDING A RELAXED FAMILY DINNER AT HIS RESI-
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DENCE. WHILE NOT CHARISMATIC, HE IS SENSIBLE, HARD WORKING,
INCORRUPT AND A DEDICATED PATRIOT. HE KNOWS WHAT IS REQUIRED
AND HAS SOUND VIEWS ON THE NEED TO CONTROL POPULATION
GROWTH, EXPAND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION, INCREASE EXPORTS
AND BEEF UP THE PRIVATE SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY. HIS
POLICIES, STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS ARE RIGHT, BUT AS WITH
VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING IN THIS COUNTRY, FOLLOW-THROUGH

AT LOWER LEVELS OF THE GOVERNMENT FALLS SHORT.

3. ZIA'S GENERAL STYLE IS GOOD. HE IS AMBITIOUS BUT DOES NOT GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF SEEKING POWER. HE SEEMS ALMOST TO ACCEPT IT RELUCTANTLY BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE IS AVAILABLE. WHETHER A TACTIC OR A SINCERE ATTITUDE ON HIS PART, THIS IS THE BEST IMAGE TO PROJECT IN BANGLADESH. THUS FAR AT LEAST THERE HAS BEEN NO SERIOUS EFFORT TO BUILD HIM UP AS A MESSIANIC FIGURE. ZIA HAS NOT YET SET FORTH A DOMESTIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OR TAKEN STEPS TO BUILD A FORMAL CIVILIAN BASE OF SUPPORT, BUT MAY AS HE SETTLES INTO THE TOP JOB.

4. ZIA WORKS HARD AT HIS JOB. HE TRAVELS WIDELY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY PUSHING THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAMS AND CHECKING ON LOCAL OFFICIALS. HE FOLLOWS A TOUGH SCHEDULE IN DACCA. LATE ARRIVALS OR NON-ARRIVALS AT SOME OF MY DINNER PARTIES HAVE COMPLAINED ABOUT MEETINGS HE CHAIRS WHICH LAST FAR INTO THE NIGHT.

5. THE ARMY IS ZIA'S POWER BASE. WHILE NOT TOTALLY COHESIVE, THE ARMY IS BY FAR THE STRONGEST POLITICAL FORCE IN THE COUNTRY. IN THE ABSENCE OF FEASIBLE ALTERNATIVES IT IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO DOMINATE THE SCENE FOR SOME TIME TO COME. ZIA CLEARLY COMMANDS WIDE SUPPORT IN THE ARMY, BUT THERE ARE OTHER CONTENDERS FOR POWER, AND THERE ARE THOSE WHO OPPOSE ZIA'S MODERATE, SECULAR ADMINISTRATION. THESE VARIOUS ELEMENTS WOULD BE STRENGTHENED IF THE ECONOMIC PROGRESS OF THE PAST YEAR SHOULD FALTER.

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6. WHILE ZIA CONTROLS THE LEVERS OF POWER NOW, WE CANNOT BE CERTAIN HOW LONG HE WILL REMAIN IN OFFICE OR HOW REPRESSIVE HIS GOVERNMENT MIGHT BECOME. WHILE CONTINUING STRONG SUPPORT TO THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF BANGLADESH WE SHOULD, GIVEN THE FRAGILITY OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND TRADITIONS, AVOID A COMMITMENT TO ZIA OR ANY OTHER SINGLE INDIVIDUAL.

7. THE PRESENT POLITICAL STABILITY HAS BEEN ACHIEVED AT A PRICE. NATIONAL ELECTIONS HAVE BEEN POSTPONED, ZIA HAS TAKEN OVER TOTAL AUTHORITY AS CHIEF MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATOR (LEAVING THE CIVILIAN PRESIDENT AS A FIGUREHEAD), AND A NUMBER OF CIVILIAN POLITICAL LEADERS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED ON EVIDENCE THAT SEEMS FLIMSAY. DE FACTO PRESS CENSORSHIP IS FAIRLY RIGID AND DISSENT IS A SURE ROUTE TO PRISON OR EXILE.

8. THUS FAR THERE HAS BEEN NO SIGNIFICANT OPPOSITION TO

ZIA'S TIGHTENING OF AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL. MOST PEOPLE ARE MORE INTERESTED IN ADEQUATE FOOD, JOBS AND PRICE STABILITY THAN IN ELECTIONS UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES. BUT WHILE WESTERN-STYLE DEMOCRACY IS FAIRLY MEANINGLESS IN A COUNTRY LIKE BANGLADESH, THE PEOPLE HERE ARE HIGHLY POLITICIZED. THEY TEND TO GIVE THE PERSON IN POWER A CHANCE BUT EXPECT CONTINUED PROGRESS. A RATE OF GROWTH SIMILAR TO THAT DURING THE PAST YEAR WILL BE DIFFICULT IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE TO SUSTAIN, AND THE ODDS FAVOR ANOTHER NATURAL DISASTER IN THE NEXT YEAR OR SO. ASSUMING HE IS NOT ASSASSINATED (ALWAYS A REAL POSSIBILITY HERE), ZIA PROBABLY **

Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS, FOREIGN ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 18-Jan-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977STATE011299
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: NEA/PAB:DBARCHARD
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770018-0142
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770140/aaaabjib.tel
Line Count: 121
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 906d47d5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags: ANOMALY
Review Date: 18-Nov-2004 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3570080
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: AMBASSADOR'S VIEWS ON PRESENT SITUATION IN BANGLADESH AND RECOMMENDATED U.S. PROGRAMS
TAGS: PFOR, EAID, BG
To: NEW DELHI
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/906d47d5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009